A Christmas Choice.

By MARTHA McCOLLOCH-WILLIAMS.

The crowd in the store overflowed upon the porch, but there was a lull in trade—a surprising lull considering it was well toward 4 o'clock of Christmas eve. The morning had been April weather, full of fitful sunshine and soft, flawy winds. Now the sky was leaden, the wind was northwest; lower, ragged clouds scudding before it let fall little spiteful snow spits, or dashes of hail.

The Murray outfit came wabbling up. There was a sort of tremolo even to the loud crackings of Sonny's whip. Lassaphine, at Sonny's elbow, scrowled and shivered impatiently at the noise. Such useless noise! The crack of doom could not have quickened the patient amble at which Brandy, the red ox, and Jinny, the pale little donkey, drew their clattering load.

"By gonnys! Must be you've fetched a feather-bed alive!" storekeeper Walker said, holding out both hands. Lassaphine overlooked them. Instead of getting out, she writhed down among the turkeys. They were fine, big fellows, white, and copperas yellow, and glossy greenish bronze. She had fed and tended and talked to them since they came out of the egg. A lump had come in her throat as she hoppled them in pairs and laid them upon the scant straw at the bottom of the wagon. The lump was there still, though Lassaphine was very far from a sentimental person. She could have sold her flock to the turkey drover last week with the lightest heart in the world. It was quite another matter to seize and bind them treacherously as they fed from her hand, and deliver them thus to make sport for an idle holiday crowd.

"Sa-ay, Jim Walker! Ain't you got a new frock and stick er red-strip-ed candy? They mought tole this yer gal er mine inside!" Sonny said, stamping his feet hard as he clambered down. "She wants ter spile our fun—Lassphine does—been a-beggin' me all the way not to have the turkey walk—though she knows I saved them bur-reds jest fer nothing else in the world."

"Come, now, Miss Lassaphine! That won't do! Not never in the world!" Walker said. "Christmas comes but once a year, you know. Come, in! Do! I've got the very dress for you—told my wife so last night, when the newest goods come in."

Lassaphine shook her head decidedly. "I don't want no dress you've got," she said. "Nothin' you've got—until the money to pay for it is in my hand."

"That won't be long," Walker said, rubbing his hands. "Look at all them fine gobblers. I call it jest a great notion of your pa's—havin' 'em walked fo;—stand you in twice whut the drovers is been payin'! Ef you don't wanter trade though, lemme take you up to the house—"

"I don't leave this wagin till it starts for home," Lassaphine interrupted, turning to pick up the rope reins her father had dropped. He had vanished inside the log store-house. As the team crawled a little from the steps to make room for a smart new buggy, he came out wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, his eyes glassy with satisfaction.

"So you really did come Jack! Good boy! Man of his word!" he shouted to the buggy's driver. Lassaphine did not turn her head, yet a slow blush gathered in her olive cheeks. She had long dusky eyes with a spark at the bottom, heavy night-black hair, and the poise and stature of a Greek goddess. Notwithstanding, most women in the countryside reckoned her ugly. She was so unlike their standard of pink and white prettiness, they could not in the least comprehend why so many men of so many minds and fortunes lost their heads over her.

Jack Childers, for instance, a congressman's son, rich and fair looking, though reputed wild; Len Haskell, most driving and thriving of the young farmers round about; Doc Grant, the bachelor tobacco dealer, a catch for any girl, to say nothing of Teeny Walker, the storekeeper's bashful young brother. It was certainly aggravating to good women with girls of their own to settle to have so many dangle after Lassaphine, who coquetted with all, and favored none. The Murray place was poorer than poverty, the bare and unmerchantable fragment of a wide plantation. Its starveling acres were either gained and gullied or overgrown with vagrant briers, and the big weather-stained house ruinous except in two or three south looking rooms.

Still the Murrays managed to live by it—Lassaphine and Sonny and Grandpap. Grandpap never forgot, nor allowed the other to forget, what was due to Murray blood. Lassaphine, for example, must learn to read, and sign her name, must wear shoes upon high days and holidays, and go to church at least once a month. He was the more strenuous because Lassaphine's mother had not been a person of quality, but a hill girl, who had, however, been obliging enough to die while Lassaphine was yet in arms.

"Drive round! We're a-goin' to walk in the back lot," Sonny called, shaking hands right and left as he spoke. All Lassaphine's worshippers were in the crowd on the porch—besides everybody liked Sonny in spite of his weakness for many glasses when one was too much for his poor head.

That was the secret of Lassaphine's presence—she could not afford to have him royster away the price of her feathered flock. For one thing there were her church dues. Sonny argued that the circuit rider, a wifeless young fellow, well clothed, well mounted, at no expense for living, had much less need of the five dollars than themselves. Lassaphine listened, smiling obstinately. She could put in action, not words, her feeling that it was due herself to pay, regardless of anything else.

A turkey walk, understand, is a sort of rural lottery, much affected around holidays in the middle south. As a lottery it comes under the ban of strict church people, certainly there is a strong element of chance in it. Each walker pays a stipulated sum for the privilege of walking—in local parlance "buys his peg." After it is bought he must walk blindfolded a given number of steps, and set the peg firmly in the ground. He who comes nearest to the stake wins the turkey, or whatever the prize may be. Commonly 10 or a dozen live birds are walked for. The winners are rarely thrifty enough to take home their live prizes. Instead, they hand them over to a negro cook, who serves them up at a turkey supper toward 1 o'clock on Christmas morning. By the time the supper is eaten it is time to go out and shoot anvil Christmas guns, or touch off hollow logs, plugged with a round of powder inside.

The back lot was an acre of rough turf, stretching between the span-new Walker house, brave in gaudy paint, and the squat weathered store, nestling in the angle of the cross roads. Half way in it a stout stake had been driven. A pile of roughly whittled pegs lay beside the store's back steps. As Sonny came down them with three parts of the crowd at his heels, he stooped and gathered the pile under his arm, saying with a mild pretense of mistrust: "Ye've all got so much Christmas in yer bones, consarn yer pictyers, ye're as full of tricks as so many unbroke mules—but I lay the best gobbler in the bunch, ye don't play none of 'em on me."

"Sonny, you shorely don't think they'd try it, with Lassaphine a-lookin' at 'em?" the storekeeper called after him from the door. Len Haskell shied a stone at Walker; Jack Childers contented himself with a shake of the fist. Doc Grant made a motion toward his hip pocket, but dropped his hand and looked at Lassaphine with: "I'll do it—honest Injun, I will—if you say so."

They swayed back and forth.

Lassaphine did not smile—she was busy with the turkeys, which had set up a pitiful fluttering and peeping. Sonny lifted out a big bronzy fellow, swung him back and forth, head downward, once or twice, and said almost shamefacedly, "How much is he worth, boys?" Would you say now—half a dollar?"

"A whole dollar—not a feather goes for less," Doc Grant said loudly, jingling a handful of loose silver.

"I say two—" Jack Childers begun. Len Haskel stopped him with a significant touch. "Let it go at one," he said under his breath. "It hurts her—Lassaphine, you know—to take even that much. She hates bein' here, but she can't well help it."

"No plottin' agin the whites, here!" Grant said jocularly, setting his younger rivals armslength apart. Teeny Walker darted up to them. "Some er you-all do me a favor, please!" he said breathlessly. "Folks are comin' so peart, likely I shan't git the chance to walk at all—but I wanter be in, five pegs deep at least—I thought maybe one er you'd buy 'em, and walk fer me."

"I'm your man!" Jack said, clutching Teeny's coin and spinning it above his head. Len grinned good humoredly. "Better lemme have er walk and a half," he said. Grant laughed explosively. "O, these boys!" he said, stepping to the wagon side, where instantly he shouted, "Step up to the captain's office and settle, gentlemen! Pegs right here, only a dime! Come on, come on! No such turkeys anywhere!"

"Come runnin'!" Haskell said, clutching a peg and flipping silver into Sonny's hat. In a twinkling 10 pegs were taken. Sonny held up his hand. "Git yer blinder, Doc," he said to Grant. "You go first."

Grant whipped out a gorgeous red-and-yellow bandanna. Sonny muffled his eyes securely, then, peg in hand, he was turned around two or three times and told to walk toward the central stake. A laughing shout went up as he shaped a course at right angles to it. "Walk big Injun! Walk away! Walk Spanish! Tiptoe fine!" the rest called after him as he stepped his allotted 40 paces. He stepped gingerly and so high Lassaphine herself joined in the laughing. When he stooped to stick his peg, and bumped fairly against the lot fence, there was a chorus of gleeful howls.

"By Jacks! If I'm to win this fellow Sam Walker woon't have a panel of fence left!" he said, pulling off his blinder and rubbing his chin. "Here you nice young men, put on this same rag, and let's see if you do any better, with no eyes in your head!"

"One thing sure—we can't do any worse!" Jack retorted, as Sonny hooded Haskell and turned him about. Haskell had an Indian's sense of direction, along with a hunter's trained perception. He wheeled slowly until he felt the wind cut his left cheek, and then with a confident smile went straight toward the stake, and set his peg within a yard of it.

"Good for Len! Well walked! Sure shot!" the others called.

"That's Len's turkey, dead to rights!" Jack Childers said, "we couldn't beat that if we tried a year. Put up another turkey, Sonny—and bar Lem from walking."

"Good as wheat!" from the crowd. Len smiled quite happily. "It jest gives me a better chance ter see Lassaphine," he said aside to Childers. "I'll walk though fer the next—then you look out."

"Here goes for Teeny Walker!" Jack said, stepping manfully out. A babel of shouts assailed him, but he kept straight ahead and set Teeny's peg respectably near the stake. The other nine walkers went wild—not a one came within five yards of the winning post. One luckless fellow brought up at the store steps—the rest scattered impartially about, though each had been mortally certain with his eyes open, that he could shut them and go straight to the goal without turning a hair.

"Teeny'll feel like a sport after this—he's always been sech er pious little cuss," Doc Grant said. Haskell nodded. "But he'll be in at the turkey supper, large as life," he said. "You must remember it's a developing process—falling in love with Lassaphine," Jack Childers added. "But say! Look yonder! There comes the preacher, as I'm a livin' sinner! I wonder what he is after!"

"Lassaphine—like the rest of us." Len growled, Doc Grant whistled shrilly, then nodded assent. "Preachers are jest men," he said. "Boys, we might as well hang our harps on the willows."

Commonly the preacher had an open countenance, a ready and engaging smile. Now his face was something set, his smooth cheek the least bit flushed as he rode toward Sonny, answering only with a grave collective nod civil greetings from every side. "Brother Murray," he said, not touching Sonny's outstretched hand, "It grieves me to speak what you may not care to hear."

"For bless my soul! Is anybody dead, or a church burnt, or air you turned against your feed, boardin' round?" Sonny asked cheerfully. "Don't be cast down Brother Micklejohn—no matter whut happens, the Lord'll provide."

"I have no doubt of that," Micklejohn said, trying to speak severely, and to keep his eyes from Lassaphine, who had risen and stood erect in the rickety wagon bed as a queen might stand beside her throne. "My trouble is not material, but spiritual. It does trouble me beyond expression to find you, a professor of Christ, openly engaged in a gambling scheme."

"Gamblin'!" Sonny's jaw dropped, his hands fell to his sides, nerveless and flaccid. "Gamblin'!" he repeated. "I never gambled in my life! I don't know whut you mean."

"I do know—it's walkin' for our turkeys." Lassaphine said springing down, and standing at her father's side. Her head was high, her eyes darted lightning, a royal color burned in her cheeks. She looked Micklejohn full in the eye—his glance fell before hers. "Where are your wings?" she asked with a little sneering laugh. "You ought to be an angel—you are too good for a mere man. Understand though, this is my turkey walk. I raised the turkeys, Sonny's jest managin' things to save me trouble. I'm a probationer, not a full member of your church—I won't ever be anything more. Take my name off your books—at once! Do you hear?"

Micklejohn bowed silently. His breath came a little short. Lassaphine waved him toward the gate. As he turned his horse's head, she laughed defiantly, and patted Sonny's arm. "O, I wish I was a man, and he not a preacher," she said, then raising her voice a little "Come on everybody! After this, I'll hold pegs—and Sonny may have fun with the rest of you."

The walking went on with a rush. Though there were but 17 turkeys, Lassaphine somehow found herself at the end, possessed of $25. It was almost dark, but she went into the store, jingling the coins, laughing and making jokes with all her court. Teeny darted out of sight—he would never, never, undertake to wait on her in the face of all those others. Jack Childers at once flung over the counter into his vacant place, and certainly sold Lassaphine some astonishing bargains from the best in stock. She made no demur—since her encounter with Micklejohn she had a royal recklessness in everything. Before she had flouted the most trifling gifts. Now she took with a free hand whatever her wooers chose to offer, thereby greatly scandalizing the few other women making belated Christmas purchases.

"Let me take you home!" Jack said, looking up into her brilliant face when the buying was done. Jack was fair and blue-eyed, and half a head the lower. She smiled down at him, and stepped toward the door. Outside there was black darkness—she could not make out even Jinny's paleness against the red of brandy. Sonny, whom Grant and Haskell had managed to keep miraculously sober for Christmas eve, was already in his seat, propped all about with parcels. "No—I'll go as I came—in my own private carriage," she called over her shoulder. "I don't want to spoil sport. Be sure, you—all, to come tell me how the turkey supper went off."

"Tell you what, she's got grit—that girl has!" Walker said, sticking his hands in his pocket by way of emphasizing his first leisure since sunrise. "She ain't afraid of nothin' in this world ner the next."

"We found that out several hours back," Jack said—and Walker could not understand why the others laughed so heartily.

Christmas dawned properly clear and cold with a powdering of fine light snow over everything. By 12 o'clock it had melted except where it lay in shadow. The road was moist, not wet from it, yet Lassaphine held her skirts high above it. She sang in a gay loud voice as she walked and now and then made a dancing step. Until now she had never in her life made a Christmas gift—and she was going to bestow upon the Rouse tribe—five strapping girls, renters and poor whites, all the gauds and gewgaws she had accepted from her lovers. When they came, later in the day, she would tell them of what she had done—she smiled whimsically in thinking of Doc Grant's dismay—there was fend, tobacco-born betwixt him and the Rouse tribe's progenitor. Len would sigh thriftily over the waste of his money; Jack—Jack would laugh with her and think it a fine Christmas prank.

The Rouses should never know. She had marked their name on the bundle—stealing in, she would knock, drop it and run away. Their house sat almost flush with the road which a little later plunged downhill into a dark and threatening gorge. Either side the hills, precipices almost, crowded in so close, a resolute man might dispute another's passage. Lassaphine hated the gorge. She passed through it whenever she went to her favorite church, Sharon. Brother Micklejorn preached there today. The Rouse tribe was likely to go and hear him. Lassaphine herself had meant to be there—also to fetch the minister home with her, to share her Christmas dinner. "Let the Rouses have him—with the rest," she thought, touching the bundle of which her arm was growing weary. She heard hoofs upon the road behind, and slipped within a roadside cedar clump to rest. She was hardly well hidden before three riders halted just in front of her, spoke briefly together, they rode furiously away down hill.

Brother Micklejohn had prayed with fervor and preached with unction, yet his heart was heavy as he rode away from Sharon. Against hope, against reason, he had hoped to see Lassaphine. He loved his Master and his Master's work, yet he was barely 23, with veins riotously full of young red blood. From the first he felt Lassaphine's spell. A brief while he had fought against it—then he surrendered everything but conscience to its subtle sweetness. It was conscience which had made him anger her; he was jealously afraid of his own heart. Another man, in Sonny's case, would have been privately told of his unseemly behavior. Love and Lassaphine had constrained him to deal harshly, upon pain of seeming to himself a coward.

She must be furiously angry—still he would not give her up—he would go to her, and somehow make his peace. He rode with eyes downcast, reins hanging. His horse, all at once, shied violently, then stood stock still. A glance told him the reason—three other horsemen so aligned as to block the way. Jack Childers was in the middle. Grant and Haskell to right and left. All three faces were set in a sort of steely whiteness. Instinctively Micklejohn understood, and in understanding comprehended how much he had mistaken his vocation. The elemental savage woke in him—love, religion, honor, ambition, were as nothing by contrast with this lust for a weapon, this mad desire to fight to the death. He was wholly unarmed, in the face of tremendous odds. He was better horsed than any of the three, and to the full as good a rider. His one chance was to ride them down, and run for it. It was characteristic that the thought of turning back never once entered his mind.

He gathered up the reins, bent his head, whistled softly and spurred straight at the line. Jack swerved his horse the least bit, let the other get his head well past, then leaning lightly tore the reins from Micklejohn's grasp and threw his horse upon its haunches. The force of impact swung his own horse around—in an instant, both animals had fallen. The riders, at hard grips, writhed free of the struggling beasts, staggered, swayed back and forth through a breathless heart-breaking minute, then fell prone in the rocky road.

Micklejohn stood six feet—he had brawny broad shoulders and loose-jointed, long-reaching arms. But try as he might, he could not free himself. Jack's arms were locked about the big chest like a steel band, momentarily tightening. Not a word had been spoken. None was needed. Micklejohn knew he was paying for what they had taken as an insult to Lassaphine. The knowledge was mere feeling—he neither thought nor planned consciously. Life meant fighting—nothing more nor less—fighting an antagonist he ought to crush with one arm, who yet seemed likely to best him.

He shut his eyes, but opened them instantly. He could see nothing but rings of red and yellow and green, melting into blackness. Still Jack's grip held, vise-like, agonizing. His breath went no lower than the throat—he must break the grip or perish. With a mighty plunging surge he got to his knees, loosed one hand, clinched it and struck Childers a blow full in the face. Blood followed it, red blood warm and sticky. It came in a trickling jet, but did not dim the fire in Jack's eyes. Still he held hard, swaying back and forth, foiling Micklejohn's efforts to get upon his feet. He saw the purple face, the staring eyes—he knew the end was only a minute away.

Triumph was in his grasp. Micklejohn had struck him again, a feeble glancing blow. All at once a whirlwind seemed to rage behind him—his arms were torn loose, he was flung violently aside—Lassaphine, her eyes blazing, stamped her foot and cried: "Shame! Shame! Shame on you! ! ! After this never call yourselves men!"

"You—don't—think—you can't—we set on him—three to one?" Jack gasped. She nodded coldly. "I can't think anything else," she said. "I know well why—because he took it on himself to sass Sonny—and me. A preacher's same as a woman—it ain't fitten fer him to fight, no matter how much strength and will he may have, I could mighty nigh manage you, Jack, fair fist-and-skull—but you wouldn't lay the weight of your hand on me, no matter what I might do."

"No! Jack said, "nor let anybody else."

"Who planned this foolishness first?" she asked, still severe.

"All of us," said Haskell laconically. "Then we drawed lots—and Jack had luck. That fellow had to be thrashed—if he thrashed Jack, then I come into the argyment, and Doc after me."

Lassaphine's face relaxed a little. "You all go on up to the house and wait," she said. "I—I—that is—there's something—I've got a word to say to Brother Micklejohn."

"I'm 'fraid its 'Yes,'" Doc said gloomily as they mounted and rode away. "Remember how she blushed up, at the last Lassaphine ain't like no other woman ever I saw—but even she's likely to be a fool over a good lookin' preacher."

"Does look like it," Haskell admitted, with a half sarcastic air. "Twould be funny now if we'd won the brother's case for him, instead of runnin' him out o' the country as we intended. What do you think about Jack?"

"I—O! nothing!" Jack said as though coming out of a dream. "In this matter Lassaphine must do the thinking."

Sonny and grandpap gave the triumphant uproarious welcome, which grew somewhat chastened when 10 minutes later Lassaphine came in with Brother Micklejohn in her wake. "Shake hands—all of you," she commanded, "then wash your hands and faces and come to Christmas dinner."

It was a royal dinner. Black Jo, whose forbears had belonged to the Murrays in the days before their decadence, had done her very best—and Sonny helped her. Sonny had a gourmet's appetite and a pretty taste in seasoning. Christmas neither was ever however bare the living other days of the year. They ate in leisurely fashion—it was quite dusk when they rose from the table. Lassaphine led the way into grandpap's room, which was bright with leaping firelight. Notwithstanding the lit candles in two tall brass sticks, she turned about and faced Micklejohn throughout what ought to have been an ordeal had seemed curiously changed. Her face was grave, though a laugh lurked in her eyes. "Brother Micklejohn," she said, "you asked me down in the hall if I came there 'because I loved somebody?' and I said, 'Yes.' Did you think I meant you?"

"I did," Micklejohn said, smiling faintly, and half extending his hand. Lassaphine's head went up. "You did me wrong," she said. "I did go for love—though—because I couldn't bear to see Jack disgrace himself—"

"Hurrah!" Haskell shouted, but

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MAGENTA FRENCH CLOTH GOWN FROM HARPER'S BAZAR

Another gown, in which the bolero jacket (to which Parisians cling in spite of the steady approach of long coat-like effects), is of light magenta French cloth, combined with sable trimming and rich green peau de soie under a guipure lace.

The circular skirt shows a slight fullness at the back, and a decided demi-train. The front breadth and border of the silk and guipure are outlined by narrow ribbon threaded through the net which forms an unobtrusive but finished heading. The skirt is 4½ yards wide.

The bodice is trimmed with a border of guipure, and the close leg-o'-mutton sleeve, fitted to the arm by an elbow dart, is treated correspondingly. The slight flare at the wrist is lined with black satin, which material also forms the draped girdle. The revers of deep green peau de soie are covered with white raised lace, which is again employed over white silk for the collar and chemisette.

With this bodice is worn a French knotted fichu of silk gauze, the ends of which pass under the jeweled clasp which fastens the bolero, and are caught under the latter at each side seam. The proper cut of this gown can be obtained only with the use of the cut paper pattern furnished by Harper's Bazar.

It will require six yards of French cloth 54 inches wide to make this costume; also six yards of silk, and 2½ yards of sable trimming. The quantity of lace required will vary according to the width of the variety chosen.

The accompanying hat is of dark green felt, with magenta velvet bands and bow, and lighter green ostrich tips.